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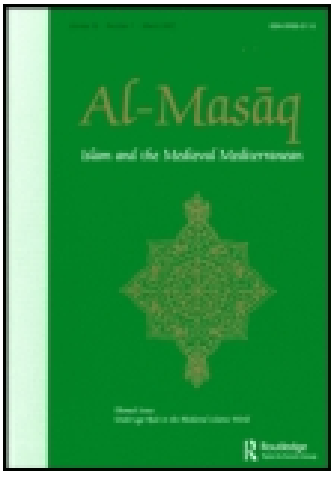

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Fidda l-Nūbiyya: The Woman and her Role in Early Shīʿite History

KHALID A. SINDAWI

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ABSTRACT *The purpose of the present study is to analyse the role played by an important female figure in early Shīʿite history. The person in question is Fiḍḍa l-Nūbiyya, the servant-girl of Fāṭima, the Prophet's daughter. After a long period of neglect by scholars, who have focused on what to their mind were figures of greater import, we shall here attempt to describe the role played by Fiḍḍa in early Shīʿite history by way of analysing her biography and her close relations with Fāṭima and members of the latter's family (ʿAlī, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn). We shall further describe what has been reported of Fiḍḍa's personality, her family, her admiration for the Prophet's family, Qurʾānic verses which supposedly mention her, and the great respect in which she was held by Fāṭima's family.*

Keywords: Fiḍḍa l-Nūbiyya; Early Shīʿite history; Muslim women; Miracle; *Karāma*; *Muʿjiza*; Fāṭima, daughter of Muḥammad; Qurʾān exegesis

Modern Western historically-oriented writings on women at the dawn of Islam focus to a great extent on the women in the Prophet's family because of their function as role-models for the behaviour of Muslim women.[1] However, although the Islamic sources for the period in question mention numerous other well-known women who lived during the first century-and-a-half of Islam, interest in these women has not survived into modern times.

It is no secret that most of the traditions and anecdotes concerning early Islam can be found in collections that were edited no sooner than about 200/815, that is more than a century after the events they describe. There is also considerable controversy concerning the question of the validity of these sources. Some scholars (Watt, Abbot, Shaban, Ahmed and others) claim that the contents of these traditions and anecdotes can be used, albeit with care, as historical sources, while

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[1] The writings in question belong mainly to feminist literature, written in the context of the current debate within Islam on feminism. See, for example, Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1992); Denise Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of ʿĀʾisha Bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: A Historical and Theological Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991; and others. One exception to this generalisation is Ruth Roded's book on women in Islamic biographical collections: *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections, from Ibn Saʿd to Who's Who* (Boulder, CO and London: Lynne Rienner, 1994).

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others reject them as unhistorical and prefer instead to use the scant available non-Islamic sources. Yet other scholars have simply stopped doing historical research and instead focus on the study of the Islamic discourse on this topic. The present study adopts the working assumption that traditions and anecdotes are to be treated not as factual reports of actual events, but rather as a narrative whose purpose was to shape a people's historical and cultural memory in accordance with the political aims and cultural conceptions of those who composed them, who may have lived at any period between the time when the reported events supposedly took place and the time when the collection was put together.

These narratives can teach us about the historical period in question in three different ways. First of all, we may assume that the stories were based on a kernel of fact. This enables us, for example, to conclude that a woman mentioned in a story was indeed a real historical figure, with some of the attributes described in the source. Second, since most of the people who composed the anecdotes had some knowledge of the society and the culture which they described, we can, with cautious reservation, learn something from these descriptions about various aspects of the society and culture described in them. Thus, for example, the descriptions that will be discussed below enable us to learn something of women's mobility and the extent of women's involvement in political struggles. Third, the anecdotes reflect their authors' views, which occasionally can enable us to identify the political interests and socio-political discourse of which they form a part, and thereby to reach conclusions concerning the social and political culture and cultural concepts of the period in question.

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Muslim women in an era of contradictions

Feminist ideas began to penetrate the Islamic world towards the end of the nineteenth century. These ideas gave rise to a growing debate about the biographies and significance of the first Muslim women at the time of the emergence of Islam. The underlying assumption in the debate was that a new interpretation of women's role in the days of the Prophet would affect the lives of Muslim women in the modern world, and Muslim society as a whole.[2] One topic that was debated was whether the appearance of Islam improved the status of women or the opposite. Opinions on the matter were divided. Some claimed that Muḥammad's teaching repressed women and removed them from the public sphere, while others pointed to various Muslim laws pertaining to women, for example the laws of inheritance and of marriage, as innovations that enhanced the status of women in comparison with pre-Islamic times.[3]

At a quite early stage the topic of the status of women became part of the debate on modernism *versus* tradition in the context of the encounter between Islamic and Western civilisation. The status of women in Islamic society came to symbolise a society's progress and development. In Western eyes the status of women was perceived as a sign of social backwardness in the Third World, thus providing some

[2] Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam,* p. 129.

[3] Jane Smith, "Women, religion, and social change in early Islam", in *Women, Religion, and Social Change in Early Islam*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), pp. 19–35.

justification for Western control of far-away continents. Teaching other societies to improve the lot of women was seen as part of "the white man's burden", part of the West's cultural message, and an argument used by colonialists against the societies over which they ruled. The educational effort to improve the status of women created a strong bond between ideas of women's liberation and other Western influences.[4] Qāsim Amīn was one of the intellectuals who believed that the advancement of women was one Western value that was worth emulating; his books *Taḥrīr al-marʾa* (Women's Liberation)[5] and *Al-marʾa l-jadīda* (The New Woman)[6] 1900) exerted considerable influence. The Western-educated Amīn possessed a secular orientation, and argued that the advancement of women could liberate Muslim society from the shackles of its backwardness and help make it the equal of Western societies.[7]

At the same time Islamic reformers, clerics with a religious education, also called for improving the status of women as part of a reform which would, so they thought, revive Muslim society by way of a return to Islam's original values, interpreted according to the spirit of the times. One of the most prominent of these was Muḥammad ʿAbduh, an Egyptian cleric whose influence over the Islamic reformist movement was considerable. He was Qāsim Amīn's teacher. As early as the 1880s ʿAbduh wrote that the need to improve the status of women originates in the values of Islam itself and not in Western civilisation. In this, as in other matters, ʿAbduh drew inspiration from the days of the *salaf* ("ancestors"), i.e., from the days of the Prophet and the first Caliphs, as he envisaged them.[8]

Islam's formative period served as the model both for proponents of women's advancement and for supporters of the traditional way of life. In the course of the twentieth century, Islamic clerics and jurists wrote quite a number of books in which they presented the traditional interpretation of the Qurʾān's view on the status of women.[9] In the last quarter of that century, perhaps as a counterweight to the increasing strength of fundamentalist Islam in various Muslim countries, secular feminist writers also began to show an interest in the ancient texts, for the purpose of reinterpretation. One of the best-known examples is Fatima Mernissi's book.[10] In the 1990s a kind of "Islamic feminism" appeared, led by educated Muslim women; they read the primary sources with the aim of reinterpreting verses that had in the past been understood as disparaging towards women, and highlighting verses and sayings that support equality between the sexes.[11] In both of these cases the authors made an attempt to "play the game" according to the rules of Islam and to compete with Muslim clerics in their own backyard.

[4] Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "Islam, women, and revolution in twentieth-century Arab thought", in *Women, Religion, and Social Change in Early Islam*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), pp. 275–306; Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam,* p. 152.

[5] Qāsim Amīn, *Taḥrīr al-Marʾa* (Women's Liberation)1899 (Cairo: Dar al-Maʿārif, 1970).

[6] Qāsim Amīn, *Al-marʾa l-jadīda* (The New Woman)1900 (Cairo: Matbaʾat al-maʾarif, 1900).

[7] Qāsim Amīn, "A historical perspective on women", in Qāsim Amīn, *The Liberation of Women and The New Women: A Document in the Early Debate on Egyptian Feminism*, trans. Samiha Sidhom Peterson (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1995) pp. 119–128.

[8] Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam,* p. 139.

[9] Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, pp. 24, 99.

[10] Mernissi, *Women and Islam*.

[11] Margot Badran, "Islamic feminism: what's in a name?" *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 17–23 January 2002, No. 569, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/569/cu1.htm (accessed 7 October 2009).

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Both women refer back to what they consider Islam's "golden age", the days of the Prophet, in an attempt to re-examine his sayings on the status of women.

Fiḍḍa l-Nūbiyya and Muslim biographical tradition

Very few women are mentioned in the Qurʾān itself. However, details about the lives of women who lived during the Prophet's lifetime and later do appear in the biographical lexicons on prominent Muslim personalities written since the Middle Ages. Muslim biography (*sīra*) is a genre that is unique in its scope and its characteristics; the earliest extant remnants of writings of this type date back as far as the third/ninth century. There are those who have explained the great prevalence of biographies as related to the science of *ḥadīth*, which sought as much information as possible about the Prophet's companions (*ṣaḥāba*) and contemporaries. Others have attributed the genre's prevalence to the great importance that early Arab tradition attached to analogy. Biographical lexicons about the lives of prominent people in a certain region or generation have been compiled from early times down to the present day. Some of these compilations also contain the biographies of prominent women in the days of the Prophet as well as his female relatives, especially his first wife Khadīja, his young and beloved wife ʿĀʾisha, his youngest daughter Fāṭima[12] and her servant Fiḍḍa l-Nūbiyya, whose lives and deeds became models to be emulated by Muslim women. Traditions about the Prophet's utterances transmitted by these women were considered reliable for purposes of Islamic jurisprudence, since they were reported by persons who were constantly at the Prophet's side, and were also present at his deathbed.[13]

The Shīʿite biographical literature has devoted more than usual space to Fiḍḍa l-Nūbiyya, who was in the service of the Prophet for a long time, and then in the home of Fāṭima, the Prophet's daughter. Among Shīʿites she is considered a model of feminine virtue; she is highly respected and every tradition quoted in her name has been accepted as true. As with Fāṭima, Shīʿite writers have attached legendary and supernatural motifs to Fiḍḍa's life, which has given an added dimension to the description of her character in tradition. Modern Shīʿite versions of her story deserve a separate treatment and will not be dealt with in the present article. In the Sunni literature, Fiḍḍa is relegated to the sidelines and does not figure as prominently as other women.

Fiḍḍa's name

Shīʿite[14] sources relate that when the Prophet presented his daughter Fāṭima with a slave girl to help her in her chores at home, he gave her the name Fiḍḍa. We can only guess at the reason why this name (which literally means "silver") was given

[12] Laura Veccia Vaglieri, art. "Fāṭima", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn (Leiden: Brill, 1965), II: 841–850.

[13] Ascha Ghassan, "The 'Mother of the Believers': Stereotypes of the Prophet Muhammad's wives", in *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions*, ed. Ria Kloppenborg and Woulter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 89–107, at 90–94.

[14] Whenever the words Shīʿite, Shīʿa and Shīʿism are used in this article, they refer to Imāmi or Twelver Shīʿism.

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to her, perhaps as a good luck wish, or possibly after the name of one of the female mules given to her by Farwa b. ʿUmar.[15] However, the most likely explanation is that the name refers to her skills as a silversmith, as we shall see below. Unfortunately our sources are silent concerning her previous name.

Her second name, al-Nūbiyya (literally "the Nubian") would appear to have been given her either due to the colour of her skin, which may have been similar to that of the inhabitants of the land of Nubia, south of Egypt, or, as is more likely, due to the fact that she was actually brought over to Arabia from relatively nearby Nubia. However, other sources claim that she was the daughter of the king of India,[16] and according to still others she was of Berber origin.[17] Her ethnic origin is thus quite uncertain.

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Fiḍḍa's family

After ʿAlī and Fāṭima had inherited Fiḍḍa from the Prophet, they married her to a man by the name of Abū Thaʿlaba al-Ḥabashī,[18] whom she bore a male child. Afterwards Abū Thaʿlaba died and Fiḍḍa remarried, this time to Sulayk.[19] Her son from her first husband died, and after her marriage she refused to have sexual intercourse with her second husband until the legally prescribed time (*ʿidda*)[20] had passed to ensure that she was not pregnant from her deceased first husband. Her second husband complained to the Caliph ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (28/644), who ruled in Fiḍḍa's favour.

Eventually she apparently bore Sulayk five children—four sons and one daughter. All that is known about them is that their mother was in the habit of reciting the Qurʾānic verse: "Wealth and children are the adornment of the life of this world" [21] out of love to and pride in them. They are mentioned as having searched for their mother when she was lost in the desert.[22]

The sons' names were Dāʾūd, Muḥammad, Yaḥyā and Mūsā. Their names are mentioned in relation to an incident involving their mother, who became separated from a caravan with which she was travelling through the desert. She met a man in the desert who asked her if she had sons, and she replied by quoting four

[15] His full name was Farwa b. ʿUmar (or ʿAmr) al-Judhāmī, a Byzantine official who converted to Islam and wrote to the Prophet to inform him of his conversion. In the year 10/632, he sent a member of his tribe named Masʿūd b. Saʿd to the Prophet with a white she-mule named Fiḍḍa, a horse and a donkey named ʿUfayr. See Rashīd al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib āl Abī Ṭālib* (Qom: Muʾassasat al-ʿAllāma lil-Nashr, 1959) I:168–169, whence Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1983), XVI:107, XXI:375, LXI:195; Khalid Sindawi, "The donkey of the Prophet in Shīʿite tradition", *Al-Masāq*, 18:1 (2006): 87–98, at p. 90, note 35.

[16] Al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XLI:273, no. 29; Ali b. Yunis al-Nabāṭī, *Al-Ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm ila mustaḥiqq al-taqdīm* (Najaf: al-Maktaba al-Ḥaydariyya, 1964) 2:17.

[17] Al-Mīrzā Ḥasan al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-wasāʾil* (Qom: Muʾassasat Āl al-Bayt li-Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth, 1988), XVI:88, no. 19236-3.

[18] In some sources his name is given as Abū Taghliba. See: al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XV:227, no. 7.

[19] Some sources give his name as Abū Mulayk al-Ghaṭafānī. See: Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, II:361; whence al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XV:227, no. 7.

[20] For more on the concept of *ʿidda* in Islam, see: Muḥammad Samāra, *Aḥkām wa āthār al-zawjiyya* (Jerusalem: Printing Workers' Cooperative Press, 1987), pp. 239–253.

[21] Q 18:46.

[22] Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, III:343–344; al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XLIII:86–87, no. 8.

Qurʾānic verses[23] in which her sons' names occurred. Note that all four sons were named after prophets. These names are quite popular among Muslims, whom a *ḥadīth* urges to call their children by the names of prophets: *tasammaw bi-asmāʾ al-anbiyāʾ* (*rawāhu Aḥmad*) (Give the names of prophets).[24]

As for her daughter, according to our sources her name was Miska, mentioned in connection with the latter's daughter Shahra, a pious woman who worked miracles like her grandmother Fiḍḍa, perhaps an indication that such traits were considered heritable.

Fiḍḍa's physical features

Fiḍḍa's only physical feature mentioned by Shīʿite sources is her dark face,[25] as pointed out above in relation to her name. This feature, as mentioned there, makes it likely that her provenance was indeed the land of Nubia, as testified by her epithet.

Fiḍḍa's death

We know neither the date of Fiḍḍa's death nor her age when she died. However, it is certain that she was still alive at the time of the battle of Karbalāʾ (64/680), in the wake of which she was taken as a prisoner to Damascus, together with Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī's wives, sisters and aunts. The sources are silent concerning her fate after that.

However, it would appear that Fiḍḍa chose to remain in Damascus until her death, and that she was buried there. At least according to some sources her tomb[26] was to be found in the "Small Gate"[27] cemetery, near the eastern entrance. These same sources describe it as being located inside a green-domed structure, surrounded by other similar shrines, the whole aggregate popularly called "the prisoners' cemetery", as it was believed that it was populated by a number of women belonging to the Prophet's family who were with Ḥusayn at Karbalāʾ.

According to other sources, the structures dedicated to Fiḍḍa and the other women in Damascus are nothing more than commemorative buildings in honour

[23] Q 38:26; 3:144; 19:12; 27:9.

[24] It is well-known that prophets' names are very popular indeed among Shīʿites. See: Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmilī (al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī), *Wasāʾil al-shīʿa* (Qom: Muʾassasat Āl al-Bayt li-Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth, 1409/1988), XXI:391, no. 27381; al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-wasāʾil*, XV:129, no. 17752-4. Note also the following statement attributed to the Prophet: "Whosoever has four sons born unto him and does not name one after me has offended me" (al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-wasāʾil*, XV:13, no. 17754-1; al-ʿĀmilī, *Wasāʾil al-shīʿa*, XXI:393, no. 27385).

[25] Al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XLIII:174, no. 15.

[26] See Muḥammad Ṣādiq al-Kirbāssī, *Al-mawsūʿa l-ḥusayniyya: al-marāqid* (London: Husseini Islamic Centre, 1990), s.v. "al-marāqid", IV:221.

[27] The "Small Gate" in the city wall of Damascus during the Umayyad period was located on the city's south-western extremity. The gate, known today as Bāb al-Shāghūr, is no longer extant. The cemetery, dating from the same time, is located outside the gate whose name it bears. It is one of the largest and best-known in Damascus. For more details see *Maqāmāt wa mashāhid ahl al-bayt ʿalayhim al-salām fī sūriyā* (Shrines of the Prophet's family in Syria), http://www.imamreza.net/arb/imamreza.php?id=2305 (accessed 7 October 2009).

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of these women, who once stayed in that place, while Fiḍḍa was in fact buried in the Baqīʿ al-Gharqad cemetery in Medina.[28]

How the Prophet gave Fiḍḍa to Fāṭima

Shīʿite sources relate the following story concerning the circumstances of Fiḍḍa's coming into the service of Fāṭima. One day, so the story goes, the Prophet visited his daughter. She complained to him that she was worn out by the hard work she did and asked her father for a slave girl to help her in her household chores. The Prophet said in reply: "True, your financial situation is difficult, but know that in the mosque there are four-hundred men with nothing to eat and nothing to wear". He added: "Were I not afraid of harming a single hair of yours I would give you want you want. For I fear that on the Day of Judgment you will be held to account because of the slave girl and ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib will deduct you on the Day of Judgment before God if ʿAlī should call in what was his due". Fāṭima, angry at her father's refusal, returned in disappointment to her home, where her husband ʿAlī, seeing the state she was in, asked her what had happened. She told him, whereupon he replied: "You went to your father asking something for this world, and he gave you a garment for your afterlife".

After the Prophet's refusal to accede to his daughter's request the following verse was reportedly revealed to him: "And if you turn away from them and you are awaiting a mercy from your Lord for which you hope, then, speak unto them a soft kind word",[29] telling him that if a relative, in this case his daughter Fāṭima, asked for mercy he should answer kindly. Immediately after the revelation of the verse the Prophet sent his daughter a slave girl to help her in her chores, and named her Fiḍḍa.[30]

Fāṭima works together with Fiḍḍa

After the Prophet gave Fiḍḍa l-Nūbiyya to his daughter, he enjoined her to share the chores equally with her and to rotate her duties with her every day. This tradition represents the Prophet as treating the slave girl on an equal footing with his own daughter, thus ascribing a principle of equality to him.

Fāṭima, so we are told, honoured her father's request and acted accordingly. We have a report in the name of ʿAbd Allāh b. Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad quoting Salmān al-Fārisī (d. 656/1258)[31] as saying:

> One night I went out with the Messenger of God to pray. As I approached ʿAlī's house I heard a voice inside saying: "My head aches so much, my belly is empty and my hands are weary from grinding barley". Salmān was

[28] That is the cemetery for the local residents of Medina. For more details, see Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ḥamawī), *Muʿjam al-buldān* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1979), I:473–474.
[29] Q 17:28.
[30] Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, III:341–342; whence al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XLIII:85, no. 8.
[31] G. Levi Della Vida, "Salmān al-Fārisī", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn (Leiden: Brill, 2004), Supplement, XII: 701–702.

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> disturbed by what he had heard and approached the house. He knocked and Fiḍḍa asked: "Who is at the door?" He answered that it was he, Salmān. Fiḍḍa asked him not to come in yet, because Fāṭima was not properly dressed. She then threw her cloak to Fāṭima, who wrapped herself in it and told Fiḍḍa that she could let Salmān enter. When he came in he saw Fāṭima grinding barley and blood flowing from her palm unto the millstone. Salmān asked her: "Why do you grind barley with bleeding hands while your slave girl stands next to you and does nothing?" Fāṭima answered that she was obeying her father's command to take turns with Fiḍḍa in doing the household chores. She added: "Yesterday was her turn and today it is mine". Salmān then replied: "May God make me your ransom".[32]

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Fiḍḍa's love for the family of Fāṭima and ʿAlī

Fiḍḍa is reported as having been very fond indeed of ʿAlī's and Fāṭima's family, including their two sons, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. This affection appears to have been mutual. Fiḍḍa is reported to have empathised deeply with Fāṭima's family on a number of both joyous and sad occasions, and the family entrusted her with their innermost secrets, showing their great trust and deep love for this slave woman, whom they considered as part of the family.

Among the secrets reportedly entrusted to her was the future date of Fāṭima's death, of which ʿAlī informed her. The relevant tradition relates that Fāṭima saw her father in a dream[33] not long after he had died. In the dream the Prophet told her that she would soon follow in his wake. Later she dreamt that angels were taking her to Paradise, where she was shown her father's palace and her own. Upon waking from her sleep, Fāṭima related the dream to ʿAlī and asked him not to tell anyone of her impending death, apart from three women, Umm Salama, Hind bint Suhayl (d. 61/681), Umm Ayman, Baraka bint Thaʿlaba (d. 16/632) and Fiḍḍa, and five men, ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās (d. 67/687), Salmān al-Fārisī (d. 40/656), al-Miqdād b. ʿAmr (d. 37/653), Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī Jundub b. Junāda (d. 36/652) and Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān (d. 40/656).[34] Here we see that Fāṭima considers Fiḍḍa one of her closest confidantes, on a par even with Umm Salama, the Prophet's wife.

When Fāṭima died, Fiḍḍa was present. She took part in the washing of her body and attended her burial. It is related that when Fāṭima died her husband ʿAlī washed her, and that the only other people who were present were Ḥasan, Ḥusayn,

[32] Quṭb al-Dīn Abū ʿAlī Saʿīd b. Hibat Allāh al-Rāwandī, *Al-kharāʾij wa l-jarāʾiḥ* (Qom: Muʾassasat al-Imām al-Mahdī, 1988), II:530–531; whence al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, LXIII:28, no. 33; Muḥammad b. Jarīr b. Rustum al-Ṭabarī, *Dalāʾil al-imāma* (Qom: Dār al-Dhakhāʾir lil-Maṭbūʿāt, 1963), p. 49.

[33] Shīʿite scholars claim that visions of the Prophet in dreams are genuine and constitute a revelation of sorts. They support their claim with the following saying attributed to the Prophet: "Whosoever saw me in a dream has truly seen me, for Satan never takes on my form or that of my regents". Another tradition has the Prophet saying, in a similar vein: "Whosoever visited me in a dream has indeed visited me, for Satan never takes on my form or that of my regents". For more details see: al-Ṣadūq Ali b. al-Husayn b. Babawayh, *ʿUyūn akhbār al-riḍā* (Tehran: Dar al-Alam lil-nashr (Jihan), 1958), II:257, no. 11; whence al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, LVIII:234–239, ch. 45, no. 1.

[34] Al-Ṭabarī, *Dalāʾil al-imāma*, p. 44; whence al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XLIII:207, no. 36; XXX:348, no. 164; XLIII:171; LXXVIII:310, no. 31; al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-wasāʾil*, II:186, no. 1761-9.

Zaynab (d. 14/630), Umm Kulthūm (d. 14/630), Fiḍḍa and ʾAsmāʾ bint ʿUmays (d. 45/661).[35] Here ʿAlī is represented as treating Fiḍḍa like an intimate member of the family.

An example of Fiḍḍa's love and concern for Fāṭima's family is the following story of her profound reaction when Ḥasan and Ḥusayn once became lost. In a tradition related in the name of Salmān b. Mahrān al-Aʿmash,[36] the latter reports in his father's name that his grandfather once told them the following story:

> We were sitting with the Messenger of God when Fiḍḍa, Fāṭima's slave girl, entered in tears and said: "Ḥasan and Ḥusayn went out from the house of my mistress Fāṭima and we do not know where they are". She wept and the Prophet immediately rose and went to Fāṭima's house to see for himself. Then the angel Gabriel descended and told him that his two grandchildren were asleep in the shed of the Banū al-Najjār and that God had sent an angel to stand guard over them.[37]

Yet another sign of Fiḍḍa's love for her mistress's family was her participation in carrying out their pledge when Ḥasan and Ḥusayn were taken ill. ʿAlī and Fāṭima vowed to fast for three days if their two sons became well again. When they did, Fiḍḍa of her own volition joined the parents in fasting.

Fiḍḍa confirms that ʿAlī is the rightful caliph

Fiḍḍa showed her loyalty to ʿAlī when, following the Prophet's death, she announced that he, ʿAlī, was more fit to be caliph than Abū Bakr. A tradition states that after the Prophet passed away ʿAlī was in the Prophet's house and did what was needed: he consoled the Prophet's wives, made burial arrangements, collated the text of the Qurʾān, and settled the Prophet's debts, amounting to 80,000 dirhams, by selling all that he owned. While ʿAlī was thus occupied, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb came to ʿAlī's house, stood outside and demanded that ʿAlī come out and pledge allegiance to Abū Bakr, threatening that he would kill ʿAlī if he did not come out. Fiḍḍa came to the door and courageously told ʿUmar that ʿAlī was busy and that he deserved to be appointed caliph rather than Abū Bakr. When ʿUmar heard this he was very angry and set fire to the door of the house, intending to burn it down with those in it, Fāṭima, ʿAlī, Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, Fiḍḍa, Zaynab and Umm Kulthūm.[38]

In this story Fiḍḍa is represented as a courageous defender of ʿAlī's right to the caliphate. Her love and respect for the Prophet's family drove her to confront even ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb.

[35] Al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XLIII:171; XLIII:180; LXXVIII:310, no. 31; al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-wasāʾil*, II:186, no 1761-9; al-Ṭabarī, *Dalāʾil al-imāma*, p. 46.

[36] His full name was Sulaymān b. Mahrān Abū Muḥammad al-Aʿmash al-Asadī al-Kūfī. For details, see Taqī l-Dīn al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī b. Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-rijāl* (Tehran: Tehran University Press, 1963), p. 177, no. 718; Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭūsī, *Rijāl al-Ṭūsī* (Qom: Muʾassasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1415/1995), 215, no. 2834-72; Etan Kohlberg, "Aʿmash", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), I: 926–928.

[37] Al-Ḥasan b. Abī al-Ḥasan al-Daylamī, *Irshād al-qulūb* (Qom: Dār al-Harīf al-Raḍī lil-Nashr, 1412/1991), II:428–429.

[38] Al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XXX:293; LIII:18.

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Fiḍḍa and the Qurʾān

Fiḍḍa was affected by the religious atmosphere that reigned in the house of her first master, the Prophet, and then in the home of his daughter Fāṭima. She is reported to have known the Qurʾān by heart and to have understood it fully. After she had memorised it, the Qurʾān became a living reality for her, so much so that she would speak in its language and quote it whenever she was asked any question.

Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 456/1072)[39] reports the following conversation between a man who had left the caravan with which he was travelling through the desert and Fiḍḍa l-Nūbiyya. When he asked her who she was, she replied: "And say: *Salām* (peace)! But they will come to know".[40] So he greeted her and asked her what she was doing there. She answered: "Whomsoever Allāh guides, for him there will be no misleaders",[41] whereupon he asked her if she was human or a jinni, to which she replied: "O Children of Adam! Take your adornment".[42] He then asked her where she was from and she answered: "They are those who are called from a place far away".[43] When he asked her what place she meant she said: "*Ḥajj* to the House is a duty that mankind owes to Allāh".[44] He then asked her when she was separated from her train and she answered: "And indeed We created the heavens and the earth and all between them in six Days".[45] Whereupon he asked her if she wanted something to eat, to which she replied: "And We did not create them bodies that ate not food".[46] He fed her and then said: "Hurry but don't rush". She answered: "Allāh burdens not a person beyond his scope".[47] He offered to let her ride behind him on his mount. She refused, saying: "Had there been therein gods besides Allāh, then verily both would have been ruined".[48] So he climbed down and let her ride, and she commented: "Glory to Him who has subjected this to us".[49] The man then continued his story and related that, when they had reached the caravan, he asked her if she had an acquaintance there, to which she replied: "O Dāwūd! Verily! We have placed you as a successor on earth,[50] Muḥammad is no more than a messenger,[51] O Yaḥyā! Hold fast the Scripture,[52] O Mūsā! Verily! It is I, Allāh".[53] Upon hearing these verses the man called out the four names just mentioned and immediately four young men approached her. He asked her who they were and she replied: "Wealth and children are the adornment of the life of this world".[54]

[39] His full name is ʿAbd al-Karīm b. Hawāzin b. ʿAbd al-Malik b. Ṭalḥa al-Naysabūrī al-Qushayrī. He was born in Naysabūr and died there. He composed many books, of which the most famous is *Laṭāʾif al-ishāra;* for details, see Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī, *Al-aʿlām*. (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm lil-Malāyīn, 1986), IV:57.
[40] Q 43:89.
[41] Q 39:37.
[42] Q 7:31.
[43] Q 41:44.
[44] Q 3:97.
[45] Q 50:38.
[46] Q 21:8.
[47] Q 2:286.
[48] Q 21:22.
[49] Q 43:13.
[50] Q 38:26.
[51] Q 3:144.
[52] Q 19:12.
[53] Q 27:9.
[54] Q 18:46.

When the four young men had reached her, Fiḍḍa said: "O my father! Hire him! Verily, the best of men for you to hire is the strong, the trustworthy".[55] Then the man said: "give me some compensation" and Fiḍḍa answered: "Allāh gives manifold increase to whom He pleases".[56] So her sons increased the amount of his recompense. When he asked them about the woman they answered: "This is our mother Fiḍḍa, the slave of Fāṭima, who for the last twenty years has spoken only in (the words of) the Qurʾān".[57]

This tradition ascribes to Fiḍḍa not only an excellent memory, which enabled her to learn the entire Qurʾān by heart, but also the wits to utilize the appropriate verse at the right time.

Qurʾānic verses that Shīʿite exegesis associates with Fiḍḍa

According to Shīʿite sources, Fiḍḍa l-Nūbiyya had the rare honour of having been the instigator, together with ʿAlī and Fāṭima, of the revelation of three Qurʾānic verses. The three verses in question are all from Sūra 76 (verses 1, 7 and 8).

Q 76:1 ("Has there not been over man a period of time, when he was nothing to be mentioned?"): According to Shīʿite sources this verse was revealed when Ḥasan and Ḥusayn were ill. They were visited by their grandfather the Prophet, and many others. Fāṭima and Fiḍḍa made a vow to fast for three days if the two children became well again,[58] and indeed fulfilled their vow when Ḥasan and Ḥusayn recovered. On this occasion, so claim the Shīʿite sources, this verse, whose message is that every person at some time has to go through a difficult period, was revealed.

Q 76:7 ("They fulfil vows, and they fear a Day whose evil will be wide-spreading"). According to Shīʿite sources[59] this verse refers to the vow just referred to, which

[55] Q 28:26.
[56] Q 2:261.
[57] Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, III:343–344; al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XLIII:86–87, no. 8.
[58] Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, III:373–374; ʿAlī b. Yūsuf b. Muṭṭahar al-Ḥillī, *Kashf al-yaqīn fī faḍāʾil amīr al-muʾminīn* (Tehran: Ministry of Culture Press, 1995), pp. 92–93; Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā b. Abī l-Fatḥ al-Irbillī, *Kashf al-ghumma fī maʿrifat al-aʾimma*. With a commentary by Sayyid Hāshim al-Rasūlī (Tabrīz: Maktabat Banī Hāshimī, 1961), I:303; whence al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XXXV:245, no. 6; ʿUbayd Allāh b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Aḥmad al-Ḥaskānī, *Shawāhid al-tanzīl li-qawāʿid al-tafḍīl*, ed. Muḥammad Bāqir al-Maḥmūdī (Tehran: Ministry of Culture Press, 1411/1990), II:394, no. 1042; Raḍī al-Dīn ʿAlī b. Mūsā b. Ṭāwūs, *Saʿd al-suʿūd* (Qom: Dār al-Dhakhāʾir, 1369/1949), pp. 141–142; Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Fattāl, *Rawḍat al-wāʿiẓīn wa baṣīrat al-muttaʿiẓīn* (Qom: Dār al-Riḍā lil-Nashr, 1966), I:161; Ibn Furāt Abū l-Qāsim Furāt b. Ibrāhīm al-Kūfī, *Tafsīr Furāt al-Kūfī* (Tehran: Ministry of Culture Press, 1989), p. 520, no. 519–676; whence al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XXXV:249, no. 7; Sharaf al-Dīn ʿAlī al-Ḥusaynī al-Astarʾābādī, *Taʾwīl al-āyāt al-ẓāhira fī faḍl al-ʿitra l-ṭāhira* (Qom: Muʾassasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1988), pp. 724–725; al-Ṣadūq Muhammad b. ʿAli b. Babawayh, *Al-Āmālī lil-ṣaddūq* (Tehran: almaktaba alʿislamiyya, 1984), 257, no. 11; Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭūsī, *Iqbāl al-aʿmāl* (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, 1947), p. 528; Yaḥyā b. Ḥasan b. Ḥusayn al-Asadī l-Ḥillī Ibn al-Biṭrīq, *ʿUmdat ʿuyūn ṣiḥāḥ al-akhbār fī manāqib imam al-abrār* (Qom: Muʾassasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1986), p. 346; Raḍī al-Dīn ʿAlī b. Mūsā Ibn Ṭāwūs, *Al-ṭarāʾif fī maʿrifat madhāhib al-ṭawāʾif* (Qom: Matbaʿat al-Khayyām, 1400/1979), I:109–110, no. 161; al-Ḥaskānī, *Shawāhid*, II:398, no. 1047; al-Daylamī, *Irshād al-qulūb*, II:222–223.
[59] Al-ʿĀmilī, *Wasāʾil al-shīʿa*, XXIII:304–305, no. 29617–29-618; al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-wasāʾil*, II:152–153, no. 1676-25; al-Ṣadūq, *Al-amālī lil-ṣaddūq*, pp. 257–260, no. 11; whence al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XXXV:237–240, no. 1; al-Irbillī, *Kashf al-ghumma*, I:302–303; whence al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XXXV:245–247, no. 6; Aḥmad b. Mūsā b. Ṭāwūs al-Ḥillī, *Bināʾ al-maqāla l-fāṭimiyya fī naqḍ al-risāla l-ʿuthmāniyya*, ed ʿAlī al-ʿAdnānī al-Gharīfī (Qom: Muʾassasat Āl al-Bayt li-Iḥyā l-Turāth, 1411/1990),

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ʿAlī, Fāṭima and Fiḍḍa made when Ḥasan and Ḥusayn became ill. After they made this vow, so claim the sources, God revealed this verse to impress all three with the dire consequences they would have to face on the Day of Judgment if they did not fulfil their vow. We see here once again that, according to the Shīʿite view, Fiḍḍa was a full-fledged participant in the life of the family, in good times and bad.

Q 76:8 ("And they give food, in spite of their love for it, to the poor, the orphan, and the captive"). According to Shīʿite sources, this verse was revealed in honour of ʿAlī, Fāṭima and Fiḍḍa, who gave food to the needy even when they were desperately in need themselves. The story is as follows: After their three-day fast in fulfilment of their vow, ʿAlī went to Shamʿūn b. Ḥārayyā[60] al-Khaybarī, a Jew, and borrowed three measures of barley. Fāṭima took one measure from which she made five loaves of bread, one for each member of the household. As they prepared to eat their meal, a poor man came to them. They gave him all their food and went to bed hungry. The next day Fāṭima ground the second measure and baked bread. When she set the table they were visited by an orphan. They gave him all their food and tasted none themselves. For the second consecutive day they went to bed hungry. On the third day Fāṭima made bread out of the third measure, but before they could eat a prisoner came to them and asked for food. They gave him all their food and remained hungry for the third day running.[61] It was in the wake of this incident that, according to Shīʿite tradition, the verse was revealed.

Fiḍḍa the miracle-worker

The term *karāma* refers, according to Muslim theologians, to a miracle performed by a saint[62] or holy man who does not claim to be a prophet, in contradistinction to *muʿjiza*, which is an act in defiance of natural law, performed by someone who claims to be a prophet in order to discredit those who dispute his claim and make them incapable of performing a similar act; or an event in violation of natural law, whose purpose is to attain goodness and happiness, in addition to a claim to prophethood and proof of the veracity of someone claiming to be an apostle of God.[63]

According to this concise definition *muʿjiza* and *karāma* are easily distinguished: *muʿjiza* is a miracle performed by a prophet, whereas *karāma* is revealed through

(*footnote continued*)
pp. 235–238; al-Kūfī, *Tafsīr*, pp. 519–524, no. 519–676; al-Fattāl, *Rawḍat al-wāʿiẓīn*, I:160–163; al-Ḥaskānī, *Shawāhid al-tanzīl*, II:398–399, no. 1047; Ibn al-Biṭrīq, *ʿUmda*, pp. 346–348, no. 668.

[60] Ibn al-Biṭrīq, *ʿUmda*, p. 347; al-Ṭūsī, *Iqbāl al-aʿmāl*, p. 528; Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, III:374. According to another tradition, his name was Shamʿūn b. Ḥānā (see Ibn Ṭāwūs, *Ṭarāʾif*, I:107, no. 160; al-Ḥillī, *Binā' al-maqāla al-fāṭīmiyya*, p. 235). Still another tradition calls him Shamʿūn b. Ḥārā (see al-Kūfī, *Tafsīr*, p. 521, no. 519–676). A fourth version reads Shamʿūn b. Ḥābā (see al-Ḥillīī, *Kashf al-yaqīn*, p. 93).

[61] Ibn al-Biṭrīq, *ʿUmda*, pp. 345–347; al-Ḥilliī, *Kashf al-yaqīn*, pp. 92–96; al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-wasāʾil*, XV:153–154, no. 17836-4; al-Ṣadūq, *al-Amālī lil-ṣaddūq*, 260–261; al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XXXV:237–240, no. 1; XXXV:252–255, no. 8–15; al-Daylamī, *Irshād al-qulūb*, I:136; al-Kūfī, *Tafsīr*, pp. 520–524, no. 519–676; pp. 528–529, nos. 528–679, 528–680.

[62] The original text reads "saint"; quite likely a translation of the Arabic term *walī*, which will be explained below.

[63] Edward Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1874), s.v. '.j.z.

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a *walī*.[64] This definition appears mainly in Sunnī sources. Shīʿites also use the word *muʿjiza* to refer to a prophetic miracle,[65] but also include in the concept miracles performed by an *imām*.[66] In order to gain a better understanding of these concepts, we shall first examine the Sunnī definition of *muʿjiza* and then analyse the Shīʿite position.

According to the Sunnī view on the distinctive characteristics of *muʿjiza* and *karāma*, the two have one feature in common, namely the violation of natural law (*kharq al-ʿāda*).[67] This condition is so basic that the expression *kharq al-ʿāda* can by itself serve to refer to a miracle, whether of the *muʿjiza* or the *karāma* type.[68] According to al-Bāqillani,[69] the *ʿāda* ("normal") refers to a repetition, whether in the form of renewal or of continued existence.[70] In the case of *kharq al-ʿāda* this habitual course is violated. The act in question must also violate the laws that apply to the specific type of creature involved. Thus, if a man carries out an action that angels perform as a matter of course but human beings do not, this, too, will be considered *kharq al-ʿāda*.[71] This kind of miracle can only occur among creatures, since it is only the natural laws governing their behaviour which can be violated.[72] According to all the definitions of *muʿjiza* and *karāma*, both involve *kharq al-ʿāda*.[73]

A *muʿjiza* must also possess a number of additional qualities, besides being a case of *kharq al-ʿāda*: It must be an act that is beyond the power of humans;[74] it must be inimitable;[75] and it must occur precisely in the manner in which the person performing it claims it will occur,[76] if it is to be considered proof of his claims.[77]

[64] *Walī* means a "friend of God", who obeys Him and whom He loves; see Lane, *Lexicon*, s.v. *w.l.y.* According to al-Rāzī, the literal meaning of *walī* is "intimate", i.e., one who is close to God thanks to his devotion, and whom God in return shows grace and mercy; see Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Al-tafsīr al-kabīr aw mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya,1411/1990).

[65] I.e., revealed through a prophet.

[66] I.e., revealed through an *imām*. Miracles performed by an *imām* and recognised by Sunnis are considered by the latter to be *karāma*; see Richard Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes. Theologien und Erscheinungsformen des islamischen Heiligenwunders*. Freiburger Islamstudien XI (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1987), p. 39.

[67] Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes,* p. 16.

[68] Al-Rāzī, *Al-tafsīr al-kabīr*, XXI:175–176. Here the expression *kharq al-ʿāda* appears in reference to an act that al-Rāzī later characterises as a *karāma*.

[69] A theologian and Islamic jurist (d. 403/1013) who made a significant contribution to the development of the Ashʿarī school of jurisprudence. He is reported to have written 56 books, six of which are extant. Among his books is *Kitāb al-bayān ʿan al-farq bayna l-muʿjizāt wa l-karamāt wa l-ḥiyal wa l-kahāna wa l-sirr wa l-nārinjāt*, which deals with miracles whose purpose is to validate claims to prophethood. See R.J. McCarthy, "Al-Bāḳillānī", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn (Leiden: Brill, 1965), I:958–959.

[70] Al-Bāqillānī, *Kitāb al-bayān*, quoted in Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes*, pp. 16–17.

[71] Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes*, pp. 17–18.

[72] Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes,* p. 17.

[73] Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes,* p. 25; al-Rāzī, *al-Barahim dari ilmi al-Kalam*, quoted in Gramlich, p. 101; ʿAlī b. Yūsuf b. Muṭṭahar al-Ḥillī, *Anwār al-malakūt fī sharḥ al-Yāqūt* (Tehran: Chāpkhānah-i Dānishgāh, 1959), p. 184; *Karāma*, p. 615.

[74] According to ʿAbd al-Jabbār, for example; see Martin McDermott, *The Theology of al-Shaikh al-Mufid* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1978), p. 85.

[75] Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes,* p. 27.

[76] McDermot, *Theology of al-Shaikh al-Mufid*, p. 85. The meaning of this condition is that a person about to perform a miracle must describe what he is about to do. Thus, for example, if he says that he will revive the dead and then proceeds to perform another kind of miracle, it does not constitute proof of his claims (Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes*, p. 33).

[77] For example, if a person causes a lizard to speak, and that lizard then says that the performer of the miracle is a liar, the act cannot be considered a *muʿjiza* (Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes,* p. 35).

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But the most important single feature a *muʿjiza* must possess is a connection to prophecy; it is a miracle performed by a prophet, and is always accompanied by a claim or demand for recognition of the performer as a prophet.[78] The purpose of a *muʿjiza* is to validate a person's claim to prophethood, and can therefore be performed only by a prophet. A *karāma*, on the other hand, does not accompany any such claim. The presence or absence of the claim to prophethood is thus the main, and sometimes the only, difference between *karāma* and *muʿjiza*.[79] Therefore, if someone performs an act involving a violation of the laws of nature (*kharq al-ʿāda*) without at the same time also making a claim of prophethood (even if making a different claim, of *wilāya*, the state of being a *walī*, for example), that act will be considered a *muʿjiza* and not a *karāma*.[80] According to this view, a *muʿjiza* constitutes a necessary condition for proving someone to be a prophet, but no *karāma* is needed for considering someone to be a *walī*.[81]

There are also some other differences between a *muʿjiza* and a *karāma*. The former, since it constitutes proof of true prophethood, must be seen by others, whereas the *karāma* is performed in secret,[82] since it only serves to strengthen the person by means of whom it is made manifest.[83] The public nature of a *muʿjiza* is also required so that the prophet can challenge his opponents (*taḥaddin*, also one of the characteristics of a *muʿjiza*). This distinction, between the public nature of a *muʿjiza* and the private nature of a *karāma*, is commonly found in Ṣūfī writings.[84]

Yet another difference between the two kinds of miracle concerns the performer's intentions and wishes. A *muʿjiza* takes place because its performer wishes to prove the truth of his claim, whereas a *karāma* may be unexpected, and take place without any volitional control by the person who performs it.[85] In the Ṣūfī view, a *karāma* may constitute an obstacle on the path to unification with God. For that reason it is considered undesirable, and to be viewed with suspicion.[86]

In Islam a miracle is a supernatural deed performed by a pious person. A miracle worker is expected to hide the miracle from the public.[87]

In the Shīʿite view, not every miracle must necessarily be performed by an *imām*. However, no miracle can be performed without an *imām*'s intercession or assistance.[88]

Fiḍḍa l-Nūbiyya is credited with two miracles, and another miracle is ascribed to her granddaughter Shahra. Both are thus considered saints. All three were

[78] According to al-Rāzī, an act involving *kharq al-ʿāda* may also be performed by a person with claims other than prophethood (a claim of divinity, for example), as well as by tricksters and magicians; however, only an act performed by a true prophet is called *muʿjiza* (see al-Rāzī, *Al-tafsīr al-kabīr*, quoted in Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes*, pp. 19–20.

[79] Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes,* p. 41.

[80] Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes,* p. 20.

[81] Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes,* pp. 52–53.

[82] Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes,* p. 43.

[83] Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes,* p. 49.

[84] Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes,* p. 43. On the concept of *taḥaddin* see also Peter Antes, *Prophetenwunder in der Aš'ariya bis al-Ghazālī* (Freiburg: Br. Walter, 1970), pp. 7–36; Al-Ḥillī, *Anwār al-malakūt*, p. 184.

[85] Gremlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes,* p. 52.

[86] Louis Gardet, "*Karāma*", *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1965; second edition), IV:616.

[87] Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes,* p. 43.

[88] Muḥammad Abū l-Faḍl Badrān, *Adabiyyāt al-karāma l-ṣūfiyya* (United Arab Emirates: Markaz Ziyād lil-Turāth wa l-Taʾrīkh, 2001), p. 57.

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performed in the context of a problem, which they resolved. The author of the text in which the miracle is related raises in the reader an expectation that a supernatural event will provide a satisfactory solution to an apparently impossible situation. The miracle then provides the reader with a satisfactory ending.

The first miracle

This miracle was performed after Fiḍḍa had moved into Fāṭima's household. One day she and Fāṭima wanted to bake some bread. Fāṭima prepared the dough and sent Fiḍḍa out to get some firewood. Fiḍḍa collected a large quantity of wood, too heavy for her to carry. She then pronounced the following incantation, which the Prophet had taught her: "Oh One! There is none like the One. You can make anyone die and destroy anyone. You are on your throne, One, who never sleeps". Immediately after she finished saying this, an Arabian from the tribe of Azd Shinūʾa appeared and carried the parcel of wood to Fāṭima's house.[89]

This miracle was born of dire necessity. The fact that her invocation was immediately answered shows that the story's author must have held Fiḍḍa in very high regard, and considered her a saint.

The second miracle

This miracle happened to Fiḍḍa at Karbalāʾ, after the death of Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī (64/680), on the eleventh night of the month of Muḥarram in the year 61/680. Fiḍḍa was one of the women of the Prophet's family[90] who had accompanied Ḥusayn on his journey from Ḥijāz to Kūfa, where he was to be proclaimed caliph. The Umayyad authorities, however, followed his movements and sent a large army to confront him before he arrived in Kūfa. The two sides met at Karbalāʾ. In the battle Ḥusayn lost his life. His head was brought to the Umayyad caliph Yazīd (d. 67/683), while the rest of his body remained out in the open for a number of days before being buried.

According to Shīʿite sources, the commander of the Umayyad forces, ʿUmar b. Saʿd, ordered Ḥusayn's body to be trampled by horses, and picked out ten men to do the deed.[91] When Fiḍḍa learned of this she immediately turned to ʿAlī's daughter Zaynab (d. 66/682) and informed her that she knew an incantation taught to her by the Prophet that would make a lion appear out of the nearby forest to

[89] Ibn Ḥajar Al-ʿAsqalānī, *Al-iṣāba fī tamyīz al-ṣaḥāba*, ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Bajjāwī (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1992), VIII:75–76; whence Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Aʿlamī l-Ḥāʾirī, *Tarājim aʿlām al-nisāʾ* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Aʿlamī lil-Maṭbūʿāt, 1987), II:365–366.

[90] A total of 15 women were with Ḥusayn at Karbalāʾ, including his sisters and aunts. They were: six daughters of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (Zaynab, Umm Kulthūm, Fāṭima, Ṣafiyya, Raqqiyya, Umm Hāniʾ), two of Ḥusayn's daughters (Fāṭima and Sakīna), and the following: Rabāb, ʿĀtika, Umm Muḥsin b. al-Ḥasan, the daughter of Muslim b. ʿUqayl, Fiḍḍa l-Nūbiyya, Ḥusayn's slave girl, and Umm Wahb b. ʿAbd Allāh.

[91] The ten were: Isḥāq b. Ḥaywa (according to some sources the father's name was Ḥawba, Ḥuwayya or Ḥanwa), Akhnas b. Marthad b. ʿAlqama al-Ḥaḍramī, Ḥalīm b. al-Ṭufayl (or al-Sabīʿī), ʿUmar b. Sabīḥ al-Sīdāwī, Rajāʾ b. al-Munqidh b. Murra al-ʿAbdī, Sālim b. Khuthayma (or Khuyathma) al-Juʿfī, Ṣāliḥ b. Wahab al-Juʿfī, Wāḥiẓ b. Nāʿim (or Ghānim), Hānī b. Shabath (or Tabīth) al-Ḥaḍramī, and Asyad b. Mālik. For more details, see ʿAlī b. Mūsā b. Jaʿfar b. Ṭāwūs Ibn Namā, *Al-malhūf ʿalā qatlā l-ṭufūf*, ed. Fāris Tabrīziyān "al-Ḥassūn" (Qom: Dār al-Uswa lil-Ṭibāʿa wa l-Nashr, 1414/1993), p. 182; Hāshim al-Nājī al-Mūsawī al-Jazāʾirī, *Ǯazāʾ aʿdāʾ qatalat sayyid al-shuhadāʾ fī dār al-dunyā* (Qom: Dār al-Kitāb al-Islāmī, n.d.), 9–453.

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protect Ḥusayn's body from the Umayyad soldiers, similar to the miracle performed by Safīna, the Prophet's slave.[92] Zaynab immediately agreed to Fiḍḍa's proposal. Fiḍḍa went into the nearby forest and found a lion lying on the path. She addressed it as "Abū Ḥārith" and said: "Do you know what they want to do with Ḥusayn's body?" She told the lion, who then came with her to guard the body. The lion spread Ḥusayn's blood on his paws and head and burst into tears. When the Umayyad horses came, they were frightened away by the lion, whereupon ʿUmar b. Saʿd (d. 64/680) told his army that temptation was being put in their path and they should not give in to it. The Umayyad army then left, without molesting Ḥusayn's body.[93]

The lion's subservience to Fiḍḍa as well as the fact that he knew when he was being called and understood what was said to him, are all features which are meant to emphasize Fiḍḍa's saintly qualities.

Here, again, a miracle takes place in a situation of urgency, whose seriousness is carefully built up in the text, and whose resolution reinforces Fiḍḍa's status.

Shahra, Fiḍḍa's granddaughter, as a miracle worker

Shīʿite sources refer to Shahra, Fiḍḍa's granddaughter by her daughter Miska, as a worker of miracles like her grandmother. It would appear that, in the Shīʿite view, Fiḍḍa bequeathed her powers to her descendant. The power to perform miracles is considered come from God, and Fiḍḍa was apparently blessed with it because

[92] His true name was Mahrān, and his epithet Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. The Prophet gave him the name Safīna (literally "ship") because he was able to carry heavy loads, like a ship or, according to others, because he traveled as much as a camel (a ship of the desert). He was of Persian origin and was the Prophet's slave, whom Umm Salama (Hind bint Suhayl, d. 681), the Prophet's wife, purchased and emancipated, on condition that he remain in the service of the Prophet (for details see: Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *Al-maqāmāt al-ʿāliyya fī l-karāmāt al-jāliyya li-baʿḍ al-ṣaḥāba riḍwān Allāh ʿalayhim*, ed. ʿAffat Wāṣil Ḥamza (no publisher, 1986), p. 86; Yūsuf b. Ismāʿīl al-Nabahānī, *Ǧāmiʿ karāmāt al-awliyāʾ*, ed. Ibrāhīm ʿAṭwa ʿAwaḍ (Beirut: al-maktaba al-thaqafiyya, 1992), I:143). It is related of him that he was once at sea when suddenly his boat cracked and he was forced to anchor off a beach near a thick forest. When a lion appeared before him Safīna said to it: "Oh Abū l-Ḥārith (an epithet for lion), I am Safīna, servant of the Messenger of God, the Prophet Muḥammad". When the lion heard this, it inclined its head and drew Safīna, who was on one of the planks of the broken boat, to safety. When they landed on the beach, the lion gave a farewell roar and left (for more details, see al-Nabahānī, *Ǧāmiʿ karāmāt al-awliyāʾ*, I:143). This tradition tells us that the lion recognized Safīna as the Prophet's servant and inclined his head out of respect for him. Safīna, too, did not fear the lion, thanks to his ties with the Prophet. In this respect, we see a similarity between this story and the tale about Fiḍḍa, whose close association with the Prophet and his family perhaps gave rise to a similar account.

[93] Muḥammad b. Yaʿqūb al-Kulaynī, *Al-kāfī* (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, 1946), I:465–466, no. 8; whence al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XL:159–170, no. 17. To this day, the spot where Fiḍḍa is said to have called the lion, in an alley off ʿAbbās St. in Karbalāʾ, is called "the place of the lion and Fiḍḍa" (*maqām asad wa-Fiḍḍa*). In addition, there is a side-street (*ʿiqd* in the local dialect) named "Fiḍḍa of the Lion Road" (*ṭarīq Fiḍḍat al-asad*). There is a tradition that pilgrims to Ḥusayn's shrine would, if accosted by a lion, recite Fiḍḍa's incantation, which was effective in keeping the lion at a distance (here I wish to thank Shaykh Muḥammad Sādiq al-Kirbāssī, who provided me with this information in a telephone conversation from his place of residence in London on 31 August 2006). In the annual Shīʿite re-enactment of the events of ʿĀshūrāʾ, one person dresses up in a lion's skin to represent Fiḍḍa's lion (for more details see: Jawād Muḥaddithī, *Mawsūʿat ʿāshūrāʾ*, trans. Khalīl Zāmil al-Ḥsāmī (Beirut Dār al-Rasūl al-Akram: Dār al-Maḥajja al-Bayḍāʾ, 1997), p. 40; Mirzā Muḥammad-Taqī Lisān al-Mulk Sipihr, *Nāsikh al-tawārīkh: Dawra-yi kamil-i tarikh-i Qajariya*, ed. Jahangir Qāʾim-Maqāmī (Tehran: Amir-Kabir, 1344/1965), IV:23).

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of her dutiful service to Fāṭima and her family. It is likely that the Shīʿi attribution of miracle-working powers to Fiḍḍa and her granddaughter has as its purpose the promotion of love for Fāṭima and her descendants among the believers.

The following tradition tells the story of a miracle performed by Shahra. It is related by Mālik b. Dīnār, who states that he was among a group of people who wanted to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca. As they gathered to say their farewells before leaving, he saw a weak woman on a thin mount, whom some people were trying to persuade to change her mind, but she insisted on going. On the way, her mount became exhausted and would not walk any further. The woman then raised her head and called out to her God: "You did not leave me at home, nor did You carry me to Yours. I swear by Your glory and majesty that if anyone else had treated me this way I would have complained to no one but You". The moment her words were said a man appeared out of the desert, leading a she-camel. He told the woman to ride the camel, which then walked with the speed of lightning. Mālik b. Dīnār adds: "When I arrived at the place where one circles [the Kaʿba] I saw that woman circling. I asked her who she was and she replied: 'I am Shahra daughter of Miska daughter of Fiḍḍa, Fāṭima's servant girl'".[94]

This tradition is based on the report of a single transmitter, Mālik b. Dīnār. The miracle here has the function of saving the woman from the dire straits in which she found herself. The nature of the miracle is a mixture of the realistic and the fantastic. The she-camel looks like any other, but its speed is fabulous.

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Fiḍḍa the alchemist

Fiḍḍa reportedly possessed some expertise in alchemy, especially in the field of the transmutation of metals. Stories of her alchemical activities relate to two different periods in her life, first in her native land before she came into the service of the Prophet's household, and later when she was with Fāṭima. In *Biḥār al-anwār*[95] it is related that when Fiḍḍa arrived at Fāṭima's house she brought with her some elixir.[96] She took a piece of copper, softened it, wrought it into the shape of an ingot and poured the elixir on it. The ingot changed colour and now looked like gold. When ʿAlī came, Fiḍḍa put the ingot before him. ʿAlī said to her: "You did well, Fiḍḍa, but if you had melted the copper the colour would have been better and fetched a higher price". Fiḍḍa, surprised by ʿAlī's perspicuity, asked him if he was familiar with the secrets of alchemy. He answered that he was, and that he had passed on his knowledge to his son Ḥusayn. He added: "We [i.e. the imāms from the Prophet's family] know even greater secrets". He then pointed and there appeared before them a buried treasure. He asked Fiḍḍa to place her ingot with the treasure. She did so and the treasure disappeared once more.

[94] Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, III:338; whence al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XLIII:46, no. 46.
[95] Al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XLI:273–274, no. 29.
[96] Elixir was a potion which was believed to be able to turn base metal (iron, copper and so on) into gold. Arab alchemists made great efforts to obtain it. In Arabic it is known under several different names: *ḥajar al-falāsifa* ("philosophers' stone"), *al-rūḥ*, *al-khamīra*. According to the well-known Arab alchemist Jābir b. Ḥayyān elixir can be produced by boiling gold in various liquids 1,000 times consecutively. For details see: ʿUmar Farūkh, *Taʾrīkh al-ʿulūm ʿind al-ʿarab* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm lil-Malāyīn, 1977), p. 243; M. Ullmann, "al-Iksīr", *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1986; second edition), III:1087–1088.

This story reflects the Shīʿite view that ʿAlī, and in fact all *imāms*, know not just alchemy, but all there is to know, and that nothing can be kept secret from them.

Fiḍḍa and *ḥadīth*

Fiḍḍa, who was a member of Fāṭima's household, is held to be a transmitter of many traditions passed on to her by her mistress. However, it is quite difficult to determine which of these traditions were in fact transmitted by her, and which were ascribed to her by later writers.

In addition to traditions in Fāṭima's name, Fiḍḍa also appears as the transmitter of traditions from ʿAlī, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn.[97] Waraqa b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Azdī,[98] Salmān al-Fārisī[99] and ʿAbd Allāh b. Idrīs al-Awdī are reported to have transmitted traditions in Fiḍḍa's name.[100]

Among the matters on which Fiḍḍa is reported to have transmitted traditions are Fāṭima's grief at the death of her father the Prophet[101] and the elegies she composed on that occasion,[102] as well as Fiḍḍa's own grief at her mistress's death.

Fiḍḍa al-Nūbiyya in modern scholarship

The Lebanese Shīʿite writer Zaynab Fawwāz[103] was apparently the first person in modern times who evoked the name of Fiḍḍa l-Nūbiyya in her *al-Durr al-manthūr fī ṭabaqāt rabbāt al-khudūr*,[104] in which she provided a short 20-line biography (pp. 439–440), where she delineated Fiḍḍa's character and mentioned her three-day fast in fulfillment of the vow she and her masters made when Ḥasan and Ḥusayn were ill.

The contemporary Kuwaiti writer Maḥmūd al-Gharīfī has recently published a small 61-page book in which he tells the story of Fiḍḍa l-Nūbiyya for children.[105] It is part of a series on Islamic sites and personalities. Naturally in a book of this kind one expects neither unalloyed objectivity nor a list of sources.

[97] A l-Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-wasāʾil*, II:137, no. 1629-3; II:203, no. 1799-14; al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XXXIX:174; XLIII:174, no. 15.

[98] His name does not appear in any biographical collection of which we are aware.

[99] Al-Rāwandī, *Al-kharāʾij wa l-jarāʾih*, II:530; whence al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XLIII:28, no. 33.

[100] Al-Ṭūsī, *Riǰāl al-Ṭūsī*, p. 233, no. 3148-57.

[101] See for example: al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, XLIII:174–180, no. 15.

[102] See for example Khālid Sindāwī, *Fāṭima al-zahrāʾ shāʿira* (Kafr Qariʿ: Dār al-Hudā lil-Ṭibāʿa wa l-Nashr Karīm, 2001) pp. 32–41, 55ff.

[103] She was born in the town of Ṭibnīn in 1860 in the Jabal ʿĀmil region (today in southern Lebanon), and died in Egypt in 1914. A well-known writer and historian, she was called *Durrat al-mashriq* ("Pearl of the Orient"). She went to school in Alexandria and studied under the poet Ḥasan Ḥusnī al-Ṭawīrānī (d.1897), the owner of the newspaper *Al-Nīl*. She published a number of books. For more details see: Muḥammad Kāẓim Makkī, *Al-ḥaraka l-fikriyya wa l-adabiyya fī J̌abal ʿĀmil* (Intellectual and Literary Activity in Jabal ʿĀmil) (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1963), pp. 183–193; Muḥsin al-Amīn, *Aʿyān al-shīʿa* (Shīʿite Notables) (Beirut: Dār al-Taʿāruf lil-Maṭbūʿāt, 1986), VII:134–135; al-Ziriklī, *Al-aʿlām*, III:67.

[104] Cairo: Būlāq, 1894. A large-format, 562-page biographical dictionary with entries for 456 prominent women from both East and West.

[105] Maḥmūd al-Gharīfī, *Yā Fiḍḍa sandīnī . . . shahāda lā turadd* (Kuwait: Idārat Thamin al-Hujaj, 2005).

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Recently the Iraqi poet ʿĀdil al-Kāẓimī has put on the internet a 22-line poem entitled *ʾIlā sayyidatī Fiḍḍa*,[106] in which he lists her virtues and those of the Prophet's family.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages we have made the acquaintance of Fiḍḍa l-Nūbiyya, a dark-skinned slave girl, probably of Nubian origin, who was owned by the Prophet and then given to his daughter Fāṭima to help her in her household chores.

Fiḍḍa was married to Abū Thaʿlaba l-Ḥabashī, to whom she bore four sons and one daughter, named after prophets.

Fiḍḍa was intelligent and forthright. She is reported as having known the Qurʾān by heart and used Qurʾānic verses in her conversation.

Among the qualities attributed to her by Shīʿite sources are a knowledge of alchemy and miracle-working powers. She is also quoted as a transmitter of traditions in the name of Fāṭima, ʿAlī, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn.

Is there a purpose behind the various tales told about this woman? It would appear that Shīʿite sources want to stress the fact that anyone who is loyal to the Prophet's family, be it even a lowly, black slave girl, is as one of the family, beloved by them and by God. In other words, Shīʿism wishes in this way to stress the equality of all its believers, whatever their ethnic origin or social status.

[106] For details, see www.alhaidaria.com/showthread.php?p=7250

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